



Collection of Historical  
Scientific Instruments  
H A R V A R D U N I V E R S I T Y

## PRESS RELEASE

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**Surveillance: From Vision to Data** poses timely questions about the history of data.

*This visual, interactive exhibition opens Thursday, September 21, 2023, in the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University*

The term surveillance may suggest images of high-tech cameras or George Orwell's ever-watching Big Brother. But surveillance involves more than watching and being watched. To understand surveillance and its consequences, look to data: who collects it, what information is compiled, how it is interpreted, and ultimately, why it matters. This thought-provoking exhibition delves into the multifaceted concept of surveillance, exploring its historical origins, impact on society, and evolution into the digital age.

Throughout history, scientists have created diverse instruments for producing and analyzing data. Colonial powers, intelligence agencies, and corporations alike have in turn wielded these techniques for surveillance--to oversee land, to make certain people visible, and to control behavior. The effects of surveillance through data have been both subtle and overt, from enabling new forms of discipline to entrenching social hierarchies.

This timely exhibition exposes data's profound and ongoing influence, revealing an elusive and ubiquitous form of visibility. Curated by graduate students at Harvard's Department of the History of Science and Harvard's Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies, the exhibition explores this story by presenting critical contemporary artworks and historical surveillance instruments side-by-side.

**Aaron Gluck-Thaler, Curator:** "Surveillance is often understood through its most visible forms, from cameras to prying eyes. This exhibition foregrounds a more complex history. Surveillance depends on data: technologies for producing data,

techniques for analyzing data, and ways of making sense of data. *Surveillance: From Vision to Data* assembles a diverse collection of scientific instruments and places them into their multiple historical contexts. What emerges from their intertwined histories is unmistakable. The history of surveillance is inseparable from scientific knowledge production about data, with enduring consequences for how people and the world become known today.”

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, scientists increasingly used instruments to measure their subjects. Often, this data was used to justify existing social orders—less often, to challenge them. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency funded some of the first facial recognition algorithms. These programs continued older ambitions to reveal the essence of identity through bodily data.

**Matt Goerzen, Curator:** “*Surveillance: From Vision to Data* explores how the data produced through surveillance practices can serve a range of outcomes. A single dataset can be made to mean different things—as when measurements of human bodies are used to support contradictory conclusions, or when an individual’s self-collected health data is suddenly deployed against them in a legal proceeding. The historical narratives and artistic works in the exhibition help us tease out other provocative questions: why are some data acted upon and other data conveniently ignored? And what is at stake when data are not produced at all?”

The 1960s marked a shift in how information was stored and analyzed. U.S. military and intelligence agencies sought to automate the processing of cold war aerial photographs used for reconnaissance efforts through computational techniques. At the turn of the millennium, intelligence agencies were able to “passively collect” data and make it actionable with tools like “TREASUREMAP”—a Google Earth-like software for monitoring targeted persons in near real-time.

The digital age brought other new dimensions to surveillance, with tech companies leveraging software, phone calls, and internet searches to track the behavior of users. Silicon Valley companies capitalize on the methods and assumptions of earlier scientific research that sought to engineer and predict behavior. Consumer products—from Google Maps to fitness devices—profit by extracting user data that allow for unwitting forms of surveillance.

**Carolyn Bailey, Curator:** “Surveillance mediates many aspects of public and private life. While we tend to think of surveillance technologies as tools of control, they are also tools of witnessing and entertainment. Many of us knowingly use digital apps that violate our privacy because they are fun or offer new insights that allow us to know ourselves and others better. In questioning the historical role of data

surveillance practices in shaping the world around us, the exhibition also examines how we adapt to them. Collectively, the works and artists in *Surveillance: From Vision to Data* explore how these tools and technologies can be used, critiqued, and subverted.”

The exhibit incorporates video, photography, and artwork to convey the complexity of surveillance. Artists and activists who have examined the invisible infrastructures of surveillance contribute pieces to the exhibit to present visitors a layered understanding of the contemporary place of surveillance in society.

Visitors can test an interactive guestbook that uses a responsive typeface to reveal how every individual’s typing pattern can serve as a digital fingerprint or flip through a filing cabinet full of “missing datasets” to explore how surveillance practices that seek to know so much have chosen to know so little about specific things and people.

**Exhibit public colloquium**, open to press: **Thursday, October 12, 2023**, Geological Lecture Hall, Geological Museum, 24 Oxford Street, 6–7:30 pm. Reception to follow at CHSI Special Exhibitions Gallery, SC 251, Harvard Science Center, 1 Oxford Street, Cambridge, MA, 7:30–8:15 pm.

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**About the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture**

The HMSC mission is to foster curiosity and a spirit of discovery in visitors of all ages by enhancing public understanding of and appreciation for the natural world, science, and human cultures. HMSC works in concert with Harvard faculty, museum curators, and students, as well as with members of the extended Harvard community, to provide interdisciplinary exhibitions, events and lectures, and educational programs for students, teachers, and the public. HMSC draws primarily upon the extensive collections of the member museums and the research of their faculty and curators.